

স্মৃতিগ্রন্থ SOUVENIR



স্বৰ্ণাভ SWARNAABH

সোণালী জয়ন্তী
Golden Jubilee

২৭, ২৮ আৰু ২৯ এপ্ৰিল, ২০২৩ খ্ৰীষ্টাব্দ
কমার্গাঁও মহাবিদ্যালয়
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স্বৰ্ণাভ

কমাৰগাঁও মহাবিদ্যালয় সোণালী জয়ন্তী বৰ্ষ উপলক্ষে প্ৰকাশিত স্মৃতিগ্ৰন্থ।

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বিঃদ্রঃ- স্মৃতিগ্ৰন্থ 'স্বৰ্ণাভ' প্ৰকাশিত লেখাসমূহৰ মৌলিকতাৰ দায়িত্ব সংশ্লিষ্ট লেখক-লেখিকাৰ সম্পূৰ্ণ নিজা। ইয়াৰ বাবে সম্পাদক দায়ী নহয়।

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Examining Gendered 'Othering' in Angami Society in Nagaland: A Reading of Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*

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Introduction:

The categorization of gender has affected every realm of human lives and left far-reaching impacts. Gender is, in fact, in operation everywhere, and it is gender that has created the binary structure in human society viz. man and woman. Every human body has been assigned a role in society based on this binary structure of gender. The interesting point is that gender has not just divided the human race into two categories; but also privileges the male over the female across society and culture. The operation of gender takes place in the form of a set of hierarchies, and it is those hierarchies that have configured human relationships in various ways. In other words, gender denotes a set of meanings that sexes assume in particular societies through social and cultural constructions. This binary in the form of socio-cultural constructions and hierarchy has remained one of the central areas of inquiry in feminism. Feminism, thus, looks into how this binary in human society reinforces social and individual subjectivities and critiques the privileging of a male at the cost of the 'othering' of females

A Terrible Matriarchy (2007) by Easterine Kire, a writer from Nagaland, poses immense importance in exploring this gendered 'othering' in Naga society, particularly in the Angami tribe. Here in the novel, Kire lays bare the patriarchy in contemporary Naga

society through telling descriptions of a host of women characters particularly Dielieno and her resistance against hierarchy. The novel critiques the stereotyped dichotomy between man and woman in Angami Naga society and eventually highlights the struggles of women due to the binary structure of gender and socio-cultural constructions. Based on a reading of Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, this article examines women's fights against terrifying odds to get education and a place in society and family in Angami households in Nagaland. While deeply examining patriarchy and the marginalization of women in Angami society in Nagaland from a feminist standpoint, particularly of Simone de Beauvoir, the article would take into account Dielieno and other women's submissive stature and gendered 'othering' along with the contexts of confrontation with the established and traditional societal norms and a transformation taking place in Angami society too over the years.

Simone de Beauvoir and Feminism:

Beauvoir is one of the most influential women writers of the twentieth century and remarkably explored women's experiences. Her publication of *The Second Sex* in 1949 brought a shift in the struggle of women and women's movements. In her landmark book, Beauvoir strongly argues that women have

been denied rights and humanity throughout history and they are systematically debarred from creating, inventing, and expanding their interests. She argues further that it is man, who has remodeled and reshaped the earth unilaterally and has pushed women into a state of archetypally 'other' and marginal. Owing to this hierarchy, to Beauvoir, a woman is always seen as an object instead of a subject. Critiquing this gendered 'othering' in human society, Beauvoir crucially states:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. Only mediation of another can constitute an individual as an *Other*. (Beauvoir 330)

Beauvoir, thus, insists that gender is closely interwoven in culture, society, and the lives of people. It is in cultural and societal practices that the female body acquires its meaning and form. Beauvoir critiques societal hierarchy and strongly pitches for a change of identity of the second sex.

Societal hierarchy in India:

In Indian patriarchal society, women's duties such as good daughters, wives, and mothers are well-defined. Wifehood and motherhood are widely considered the central roles for women in Indian society, and such cultural practices have become deterrence for women in most cases in attaining any specialized knowledge of a discipline and becoming professionals. In Indian cultural practices, a good woman is a woman who is caring, ever scarifying, loving, sweet, and gentle. This hierarchy prevailed in Indian society regarding the role of women has become an obstacle for those who want to go beyond these set roles and traditional practices. It is worth mentioning here that India is a country where people belonging to various communities live together, and

therefore, cultural practices also vary among communities and societies.

Angami Tribe in Nagaland:

The North-Eastern state of Nagaland houses 16 major tribes along with several sub-tribes. Among the major tribes of Nagaland, here mention may be made of Ao, Angami, Chang, Konyak Lotha, Sumi, Chakhesang, Khiamniungam, Kachari, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Yimchungru, Kuki, Seliang and Pochury.

The Angami tribe in Nagaland uses the Angami language for their communication. The Angamis are considered the fourth largest tribe presently living in the Indian state of Nagaland. In other words, the people belonging to the Angami tribe of Nagaland constitute 8.06% of the total population of Nagaland. The Angamis have their habitation basically in the central parts of the present Kohima district and part of the Dimapur district of Nagaland.

Naga society and the status of women:

Like other societies in India, gender disparity also exists in Naga society. In Naga societies too, gender responsibilities and roles are divided through cultural practices. Similar to every patriarchal society, a Naga woman finds herself under different limitations, imposed through patriarchal exercises and tribal laws and customs. In other words, unlike the myth of the 'privileged', Naga women have also experienced gendered 'othering' and inequality exercised through customary laws and traditional practices, and it is in this context Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* poses immense significance. Kire in the novel debunks the myth of a 'privileged' woman in Naga society through her exquisite descriptions of women characters in Angami society like Dielieno, Vimeneo, Nisano, etc., and their struggles in creating spaces and identity. The narrative crucially shows the struggles of women in Angami society and their terrifying odds and eventually critiques this gendered 'othering' in Naga society.

Representation of gendered 'othering' in Angami Naga society in Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*:

Similar to other tribal societies in Nagaland, women are caught in the labyrinth of patriarchal exercises and tribal customary laws in Angami society. Kire's central character Dielieno unravels this gendered hierarchy in Angami society from the very beginning and shows how women are caught in gendered inequality. Dielieno felt this 'othering' in their household from the time when she was four and a half years old. While sitting in the kitchen with her brother, her grandmother threw a question- "what meat do you want?" (Kire 1). Dielieno immediately replied that she needed the leg and requested that. Discouraging her and putting the chicken leg on the plate of her two years older brother Bulie, the grandmother stated that "I wasn't asking you, silly girl,... that portion is always for boys"(1). Her grandmother further stated that "girls must eat the other portions"(1), and thus, these practices in Naga households unequivocally point out gendered inequality existed through traditions and customary laws. Interestingly, these traditions and customary laws have been established in such a way that even women just like the grandmother practiced those without unflinching concern.

Dielieno had four elder brothers and her parents in the family. She spent her childhood in the house of her grandmother as per the wishes of the latter. The grandmother desired to make her a woman perfect in traditionally assigned roles and responsibilities. Once the grandmother learned somehow that Dielieno's mother sent the older boy to fetch water; then she issued a veiled warning to her mother stating that she should send the girl the next time to fetch water because fetching water is the job of a girl. The grandmother also reminds Dielieno's mother that "no man in my day has ever fetched water." (Kire 3)

As per the routine at the grandmother's house, Dielieno had to fetch water early in the morning and do all other household activities. The Grandmother held the opinion that "the girl must start working at

home" and hence she can't "run about with her brothers anymore" (Kire 4). When she complained about these behaviours of the grandmother to her parents and questioned the latter's attitude, her father consoled her by saying that "she only wants to make sure you turn out to be a good woman" (5). It is important to note here that the day before sending the girl to live with the grandmother, her father accused her mother of not raising her properly to become "the ideal girl" (9). Moreover, women, as described in the novel, couldn't even laugh and shout largely because of the reason that "those women never got husbands and no respectable person ever befriended them" (113). All these have debunked the deeply rooted gendered 'othering' and fixity associated with women's roles and responsibilities in Angami society.

Women and Education in Angami Naga Society:

The novel vividly shows how women are deprived of education in Angami Naga society and only learned to become perfect in their traditional roles. Dielieno became six years old and the time of her schooling arrived. Dielieno's parents sought the permission of the grandmother to send her to school. The grandmother was disappointed at the idea of sending a girl to school and therefore made her efforts to deter Dielieno's going to school by uttering:

"In our days...girls did not go to school. We stayed at home and learned the housework. Then we went to the fields and learned all the fieldwork as well. That way one never has a problem with girl-children. They will always be busy at some work or other, too busy to get into trouble. It is okay if boys have a spot of trouble now and then, but with girls, it is different. You would never be able to get rid of her once she has gotten into trouble. I really do not approve of girls getting educated. It only makes them get fancy notions about themselves and they forget their place in the family." (Kire 22)

However, Dielieno was admitted to school

despite reservations from the grandmother. But Dielieno had to complete all the household work with Bano including fetching water early in the morning before going to school. Despite these difficulties in continuing her education, Dielieno stood well in examinations and was rewarded with a promotion to a different class. But the grandmother was not happy altogether. She questioned once again her father and warned about the consequence of educating girls:

"I really don't know what it is your generation sees in school. Your children are not being taught the skills of life because they are too busy studying. I was doing such a good job of teaching the girl to work about the house. It was difficult enough. ...she will completely forget all I have taught her now." (Kire 35)

Again, in that conversation, Dielieno's father assured his mother that she would be able to remember all her teaching about household activities. When the father referred to the failure of Dielieno's brothers namely Vini and Petu in school and expressed pleasure at her success, the grandmother reminded him:

"They are boys. Boys will be boys. They will be alright. They should be taught to be manly. In my father's day, boys never did any work because they had to look after the village and engage enemy warriors in warfare. The household that did not have a male heir was considered barren. They were always in constant danger if there was a war. The women would only have one man to protect them. That's why we love our male children so much and we give them the best of food. And we should." (Kire 36)

Moreover, the grandmother did not like the idea of Dielieno going to college for further study after the successful completion of her schooling. Once again the grandmother reminded everyone that sending girls to get education doesn't augur well for their lives because "some men don't like it if their wives are too educated" (Kire 188). Emphasizing further the role

and responsibility of women in society, the grandmother noted:

...but a woman's role is to marry and bear children, remember that. That is her most important role. Men don't like to marry educated wives. And if you find no one to marry you, you will be alone in your old age and have no one to bury you. (Kire 190)

Such a setup has turned women subordinate to men and showed women as if they are born and bred for child producing and rearing. All of these have unmistakably pointed out the traditions and practices of gendered inequality deeply pervaded the tribal Angami society. These traditions have put the rights and liberty of women aside and limited their presence and activities in society. Interestingly, Beauvoir demystified such kinds of limitations in a woman's life across culture and society and pointed out how a woman is made only in society through hierarchy, binary, and socio-cultural practices.

The Context of Inheriting Property:

In another discussion held between Dielieno and Bano, the other girl who lived at the house of the grandmother, the latter highlighted the familial preference for boys. Bano stated that the father of Vimenuo, a friend of Dielieno, became angry with his wife since "his wife had given birth only to daughters" (Kire 24). Vimenuo's father was, indeed, in need of a boy "to carry on his name." (24). Penetrating further the gender inequalities pervaded in this Naga society, Bano critiques:

...girl children are never considered real members of the family. Their mission in life is to marry and have children and be able to cook and weave cloths and look after the household. If they got married, they would always be known as somebody's wife or somebody's mother and never somebody's daughter. That way they could not carry on their father's name. I thought hard about it but could not think of anything to replace

that system so I gave up. (Kire 25)

This clearly shows how 'girl children' are not considered real members in an Angami society in Nagaland. The role of women is just limited to get married and become somebody's wife along with bearing and rearing children. They could not even carry their father's title after marriage. In brief, women in Angami society have a quite confined space and identity and are not in a situation to decide their futures.

Menstruation Seen as a Curse:

When Dielieno was in the sixth grade in school, she was almost eleven years old. Grandmother one day asked Bano whether the girl had "got the curse" (Kire 121). Dielieno could not understand what the curse could be and therefore asked Bano about it. Explaining that, Bano said that "it is something that women are afflicted with when they are about 13 or 14, and they have it almost all their lives..." (123). When she asked Bano whether "boys bleed as well when they are grown" (125), then Bano informed her that boys do not have the tendency of bleeding unlike girls. Therefore, grandmother and other women, as Banu states in the narrative, called this bleeding of girls a curse. Dielieno got that curse when she turned thirteen. Her friend Vimenuo also got it around the same time. During the days of menstruation, they avoided the boys as much as they could and became nervous like any other girl. Moreover, both hesitated to buy sanitary napkins from a pharmacist who was a male. They became so nervous that they decided not to purchase sanitary napkins from the pharmacy. All these reservations have demonstrated the prohibitions connected to the menstruation of women which is absolutely normal and a natural course.

Apart from these aspects, it is women who have borne the brunt of domestic violence too. Dielieno's elder brother Vini became an alcoholic, and as a corrective measure to mend his habit of drinking he was married to a girl Nisano. However, that tactic of

taming Vini did not last long and he started drinking again. Nisano as described in the novel had to undergo immense suffering at the hands of Vini. She was physically assaulted on many occasions and therefore she had bruises on her body. Such instances make it clear that Naga society is badly ridden in gender inequality and such gendered 'othering' has hampered realizing the complete potential of women. Moreover, it has become clear that it is always women who find themselves at the receiving end in one way or the other in almost every society across cultures.

These images of 'ideal women', as Beauvoir stressed, are creations of socio-cultural practices and thus the entire notion of woman is a created one. In other words, since anyone is not born a woman, therefore she can change her condition through her actions and reactions. Therefore, things have started to change even in Naga society like any other society in the world. Unlike the characters of Bano, Dielieno's mother, Vimenuo, and Nisano, Dielieno stood alone as the narrative suggests and raised her stature surpassing the hurdles and crossing the barriers. On many occasions, she unlike all other women characters who couldn't withstand questioned and critiqued the grandmother for the undue preference accorded to the male child including her brothers. She also constantly questioned the deprivation of women's rights and liberty in her society and debunked the hierarchical practices assorted to limit the existence of women in Naga society. Resisting and revolting against these practices which have marginalized women and nullified women's subjectivity, Dielieno revived her spirit and went past the difficulties to create an identity of her, free from any depravity and binary. She, indeed, refuted the images of 'good woman' heralded in society through traditions and customary laws generation after generation and strongly objected to this gendered 'othering'. Showing her inclination to go beyond the set rules for women, Dielieno stated that "I don't care to be a good woman."

"I shan't ever be a good woman, whatever that is..."
(Kire 37)

Conclusion:

After all, the socio-culturally projected notion of gender has, indeed, influenced every realm of human life, and the tribal Naga society is not an exception to. As Beauvoir's emphasis highlights, this projected notion of 'woman' is the one that has pushed half of the people in human society to 'othering' and relegation. As it has been seen in the illustrations from the text, the Angami Naga society is also fraught with such gendered discrimination and all the women bore the brunt of such inequity for no fault of theirs. Thus, the protagonist of the novel Dielieno and all other women characters have undergone immense suffering which not only limited their realization of potential, but also restricted their liberty and dignity of life. Since the notion of 'woman' is a socio-culturally projected one, therefore, there is every opportunity, as Beauvoir stressed, to change her condition. Eventually, it was Dielieno who became successful to go beyond these hurdles and carved a niche for herself through her constant resistance and acts of rebellion.

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